

# Isaac Born, Ishmael Cast Out (Genesis 21)

## Expository Lessons from the Book of Genesis

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### I. Recap from the Previous Lesson

- a. Two (of three) disturbing stories in this part of Genesis. Need to dig deeper in stories like this to make sense of them, to learn lessons that may apply to us, and to get better a understanding of who God is and how he views us.
- b. Moabites and Ammonites came from the daughters of Lot having relations with their father.
  - i. These two nations would play significant roles in the story of God's people later on in the Old Testament.
  - ii. Even from a very corrupt nation (the Moabites), God can bring out a true gem, a great hero or heroine of faith (as in the case of Ruth). There is hope for each of us, regardless of the people or family we came from.
- c. God protects his people, those who are righteous. He protected Abraham and Sarah and got them out of a dangerous situation under Abimelech. That encounter can give us a greater appreciation for Sarah, who is held up as a challenging example for Christian wives in **1 Peter 3** for her true beauty, submission and for not giving way to fear.

### II. Overview of this Lesson

- a. We look at the third in a series of three rather disturbing stories in this part of Genesis. Abraham casts out his own son Ishmael and his maidservant Hagar. They both almost die in the desert.

### III. Isaac Born; Ishmael and Hagar Sent Away (Read **Genesis 21:1-21**)

- a. Storyline
  - i. Sarah conceives as promised, gives birth to Isaac.
  - ii. Abraham was age 100 and Sarah about 90 (**Genesis 17:17**) when Isaac born. (Note that Abraham was 86 when Ishmael born; so Ishmael was about age 14 when Isaac born.)
  - iii. Isaac circumcision on the 8<sup>th</sup> day.
  - iv. Feast given on the day Isaac is weaned.
  - v. Sarah sees teen-aged Ishmael (maybe age 15-18) "playing with" her son. Some translations suggest mocking.

- vi. Sarah wants Ishmael and Hagar cast out. Abraham is reluctant.
  - vii. God tells him to agree to Sarah's request.
    - 1. "For in Isaac your seed shall be called" (**Genesis 21:12**)
    - 2. Yet Ishmael also will be a great nation, because he is from Abraham
      - a. Note that God also brought nations out of Esau, Moab and Ammon.
  - viii. In the desert, they nearly die. "The Angel of God" (or "an angel of God" in some translations) intervenes, and promises Ishmael will become a great nation. "God was with the lad" (**Genesis 21:20**).
  - ix. Ishmael grows up, his mother finds him a wife from Egypt.
- b. Why is this story important for us today? Three reasons.
- i. First reason this story is significant: regarding the Arabs (and Muslims).
    - 1. Many Muslims today claim (with zero evidence) that the Jews 'changed the text' in Genesis to show the blessings coming through Isaac, Jacob and the Jews. However, that IS the story, not just a minor detail. As crazy as it may seem to us, many Muslims today have the audacity to claim that it was actually Ishmael, not Isaac, whom Abraham took to sacrifice on the mountain in **Genesis 22!**
    - 2. God said that he would make a great nation from Ishmael (considered father of the nomadic Arab people); HOWEVER, the great promise to Abraham (all nations blessed through him) would be through Isaac.
    - 3. If the promise is fulfilled through Isaac (not Ishmael), then the blessing comes through the Jews (not the Arabs).
    - 4. A great but limited blessing was given to Ishmael.
      - a. Re-read **Genesis 17:15-21**
        - i. Ishmael to be blessed exceedingly; 12 nations (tribes) to come from him.
        - ii. However, the covenant of God to be established with Isaac, *not Ishmael*.

- b. Ishmael's role and fate was previously revealed to Hagar by the Angel of the Lord while she was pregnant in the desert, after she had fled from Sarah.

- i. Re-read **Genesis 16:7-12**

- 1. A vast multitude would come from Ishmael.
- 2. He will be a rustic man
- 3. He will oppose many, and many will oppose him.

- c. The Lord said that *the reason why* it was good for Abraham to comply with Sarah's request to banish and disinherit Ishmael was because "*in Isaac your seed shall be called*". (**Genesis 21:12**)

- 5. After being banished Ishmael shows up once more, about 60 years later, at Abraham's burial, in **Genesis 25**. There we find the names Ishmael's 12 sons, referred to as "twelve princes according to their nations" This demonstrated fulfillment of the limited promise God had given to Ishmael; while the greater promise given to Isaac was yet to be fulfilled. (**Genesis 25:12-16**)
- 6. Important for us to understand this clearly as we reach out to the 1.6 billion Muslims in the world (about 23% of the world's population), to help them come to faith in Christ.
- 7. But, why did all this with Hagar and Ishmael have to take place? Why couldn't Abraham and Sarah simply have had Isaac when they were old (without the Hagar/Ishmael part of the story)? Is there some reason these events happened this way, and that these details of the story were recorded in Scripture?

- ii. Second reason this story is significant: regarding the Jews

- 1. Not being Jewish, I am reluctant to speak on the next point, which no doubt will be extremely offensive to Jews. So I must defer to someone with impeccable Jewish pedigree: Saul of Tarsus (otherwise known as Paul).
  - a. **Philippians 3:4-6** "...If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised on the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; concerning the law, a

Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning righteousness which is the law, blameless.”

- b. **Acts 22:1-5** Paul, in Jerusalem addresses a crowd of his Jewish brethren (switching into the Hebrew language) with these words: “...I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers’ law, and was zealous for God as you all are today...” (Then Paul proceeds to tell them how he had worked with the High Priest to have Christians imprisoned and put to death).
2. Paul refers to the **Genesis 21** story in **Galatians 4**, as the basis for important things he teaches to Christians in **Galatians 5**. The issues of concern to Paul as he addresses Christians in Galatia (similar to some of his other letters as well as addressed in **Acts 15**) were:
  - a. Do Christians need to be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses?
  - b. To what extent should Christians live like the Jews?
3. A side note before we read this often-misunderstood and misapplied passage in Galatians. Many Protestants today understand Galatians and Paul’s writings in general much differently than the early Christian writers did. Two key words here: ‘law’ and ‘spirit’.
  - a. Original Greek text was all capitals; so when translating into English, the translators have to make decisions whenever they run across these terms, whether to render it with capital or lower case first letter. Because the meaning of words can change depending on whether capitalized or not. Consider the following words: father, word, law, spirit, son, god, or prophet. (For example, “Father” refers to God the Father, while “father” can refer to any person’s father. “The Son” refers to the Son of God, while “son” can simply mean anyone’s male child.)
  - b. Sometimes it is obvious from context whether a specific word should be understood in the ‘capital’ or ‘lower case’ sense, but not always. When translating into English, the translators have to make a decision whenever they run across these terms that could be understood either way. Instead of simply assuming that

the modern translator 'got it right' regarding capitalization, another option is to consider how the early Christians understood the meaning of these words within a particular passage.

c. Law:

- i. Using a 'capital L', the word '**Law**' would refer to the Law of Moses (for example, "the Law and the Prophets" in **Romans 3:21**).
- ii. 'Lower case l', **law**, could refer to any law or command of God.

d. Spirit:

- i. Using a 'capital S', the word '**Spirit**' would refer to the Holy Spirit.
- ii. 'Lower case s', **spirit**, is a more general term that could refer to a person's own spirit, an evil spirit, etc.

4. In the passage we are about to look at, many early Christian writers understood the word 'law' here as referring to the Law of Moses (capital 'L' sense), while they would have understood the term 'spirit' as referring to a person's own spirit within them (lower case 's' sense). This is different from what we see in most modern English translations, and I believe it contributes to some of the confusion here.

- a. For further information regarding use of the term 'law' versus 'Law', I recommend an excellent foundational CD lesson by David Bercot, *"How Do We Harmonize Paul and James"*.
- b. For more information on early Christian understanding of the term 'spirit' as used here and elsewhere in the New Testament, I highly recommend an audio CD lesson by David Bercot, *"What the Early Christians Believed about the Difference between the Spirit and the Soul, and Why It Matters"*.
- c. (Both audio lessons cited above are available through Scroll Publishing.)

5. Read **Galatians 4:21-31**. There is an important allegory contained in the story from **Genesis 21**. Paul says this story

happened for a reason: to provide a lesson for the Jews (and for us).

- a. Two sons of Abraham correspond to two covenants.
- b. Ishmael (born to Abraham from Hagar) = those born from Abraham according to the flesh = *the Jews*.
  - i. They are in bondage (to the Law of Moses).
  - ii. They are the (old) "Jerusalem that now is", represented by Mount Sinai.
  - iii. They persecute the second son (Jews persecuting Christians, as seen in the **Book of Acts**).
- c. Isaac (born to Abraham from Sarah) = those born from Abraham according to the promise, according to the spirit = *the Christians*.
- d. Imagine being a Jew, proud of your heritage and lineage, hearing Paul make the case that your race, the Jews, was represented *by Ishmael* in the **Genesis 21** story, not by the son of the promise!
- e. Four elements of the allegory (Ishmael = Jews):
  - i. Jews came first, before the Christians.
    1. Corresponds to Ishmael being the 'older brother'.
  - ii. Jews persecuted the Christians.
    1. Corresponds to Ishmael persecuting/mocking Isaac.
  - iii. Jews were descended from Abraham according to the flesh; Christians descended from Abraham according to the promise, according to faith (as in **Romans 4**).
    1. Corresponds to Ishmael being born in a normal way, but Isaac being born as result of a promise, involving great faith.
  - iv. Jews (who did not believe in the Christ) were rejected and disinherited from the kingdom of God (similar to **Romans 10-11**).

1. Corresponds to Ishmael being disinherited and cast out by Abraham, his father. (Abraham did not want to cast him out, but God said he should – in a story destined to provide a message to all Jews in the future.)
2. Paul uses another allegory, an olive tree, in **Romans 11**, to illustrate the condition of the Jews. The natural branches (the Jews) have been cut off from the tree, and wild branches (Gentile believers) grafted in. (Note that the Christians are warned to be diligent, or they too can be cut off!) However, unlike in Ishmael’s case, there is still hope for the Jews to obtain the full blessings promised. Paul says that they, “...if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again”. (**Romans 11:23**)

v. So, this story is significant to the Jews. If they reject Christ and the Christians, they will not inherit the kingdom of God.

iii. Third reason this story is significant: regarding Christians today

1. Point Paul is making in **Galatians 4 & 5** is that we Christians, foreshadowed by Isaac in the story, are ‘free’, unlike our older brother Ishmael (who represented the Jews).
  - a. Many use passages like these to teach (*incorrectly*) that we Christians are now “free in Christ” by which they mean that we are no longer are bound by *any* laws or rules whatever. They make a contrast between following any laws or rules (which they equate to the Old Testament way) versus “living under grace”. By that expression, they mean we are liberated to do practically whatever we want (but guided by the Holy Spirit now living within us). But is that what Paul is teaching here?
  - b. Critical question: We are free; but free of, or free from, what?
  - c. **Read Galatians 5:1-12**
    - i. Bondage that the Jews are under (represented by Ishmael being born of bondwoman or slave) is

bondage to the Law of Moses.(Capital 'L' sense of the term "law" here.)

- ii. We (Christians) have been freed from circumcision and the Law of Moses. But does that mean we have been freed from following any laws or commands of God? We are free citizens of God's kingdom; but are there laws now in the kingdom of God that we are bound to follow?
- iii. We must be prepared to give an answer when we hear people talk about "freedom in Christ" and "being led by the Spirit". Those are common charges made against Christians who are serious about putting into practice all that Jesus commanded. We are accused of being "legalistic" and "in bondage to law".
- iv. What does Jesus have to say about laws, rules and commands?

d. Read **Matthew 7:13-27**

- i. To those who believe but do not obey his commands, Jesus will say: "I never knew you; depart from Me you who practice lawlessness!" (**Matthew 7:23**)
  - ii. Prior to this warning, Jesus gave commandments in the Sermon on the Mount regarding: anger, lust, divorce, marriage, nonresistance, swearing, forgiving others, helping the poor, prayer, fasting, judging others, worry and trusting God.
  - iii. Jesus said the road to him is narrow and difficult. However, it is not impossible. In **Matthew 11:28-30** Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon ourselves, "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."
2. Many popular preachers today twist Paul's words by taking them out of context and nullifying what Jesus said. We are free indeed; we have been freed from the bondage of the Law of Moses. This was foreshadowed by the birth of Isaac, son of the free woman (Sarah). However, if we live lawless lives Jesus will reject us in the end, and say *he never knew us*.



**IV. Abraham Resolves Dispute with Abimelech (Genesis 21:22-34)**

- a. Summary overview: Abraham, dwelling in land of the Philistines, has dispute with Abimelech over who owns a well. They make a covenant, and Abraham continues in that land.

**V. Recap of this Lesson**

- a. Isaac born to Sarah, in fulfillment of the promise. At celebration on the day Isaac weaned, Sarah sees Ishmael playing with (mocking?) her son. Advises Abraham to disinherit Ishmael. God concurs; Abraham sends Ishmael and Hagar away.
- b. Ishmael to become a great nation, many descendants, 12 tribes (Arab people descended from him). Yet God's covenant with Abraham clearly stated to be through Isaac, not Ishmael. This is important related to later claims of Muslims.
- c. According to Paul, the **Genesis 21** story of the two sons (Ishmael and Isaac) foreshadowed later Jews vs. Christians.
  - i. Original and older son (Ishmael) vs. the younger (Isaac) who would be born later.
  - ii. Older son of the slave woman (bondage to Law of Moses), younger of the free woman (not bound to that).
  - iii. Older persecutes the younger son.
  - iv. Older son is rejected, disinherited (yet Paul tells us there is still hope if the Jews turn back by faith).
- d. Christians are the son of the free woman, not the slave woman. This foreshadows our freedom from circumcision and the Law of Moses. However, there are other laws in the kingdom of God, including what Jesus taught on the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus called those who do not follow his commands "lawless" and clearly said that they will be rejected.